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The Importance of Being Incorrect: Burma Road pieces, from end to beginning

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Abstract

Yu relates his travel to Kunming, China. After being in Kunming and back in Australia, he suddenly felt a kind of illness that defied description. Everything was normal for him, and too correct. He realized that his Kunming travel showed the importance of being incorrect.

Keywords

pieces, road, burma, incorrect, beginning, being, importance, end

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The Importance of Being Incorrect: Burma Road pieces, from end to beginning

You arrived back in Melbourne on 4 May 2002. As soon as you arrived back, you felt better. It's the same old Melbourne all over again, the blue sky, the almost empty freeway, the taxi driver speaking broken English, the feeling that you could sleep away your time again, endlessly. And you felt good, too, correct, you mean. That is you don't even want to smoke. It was odd that you could hardly finish the first *Zhonghua* you smoked. By the time you had the second one, you nearly fainted with its strong smell. And you managed to only smoke half of the third. Then you realized you were sick; you had literally fallen ill. It was a kind of illness that defied description. Everything was normal with you. You could eat, drink, sleep well, do your normal TV watching, send your normal email messages informing people of your coming back and ring a couple of friends. But that's where normality ends and illness starts, because you are suddenly struck down with a kind of helplessness and hopelessness that to some is almost happiness. Everything is so correct. You browsed through the leftover Saturday extras of *The Age* and were disgusted to read this guy recommending multiple revisions of one's writing. The eunuch mentality, you commented to yourself.

"Perhaps you have to restrict your heart gone wild," she said.

"I know," you said. "But I am feeling so ill. What is there for me to do any more?"

"Just have a good rest," she said.

"I'm already rested up and I feel so tired," you said. "Oh, the punishing grave-like quietness!"

"Why not just finish the stuff you've been writing and sell it?"

"Might as well," you heard yourself say. You went back to your iBook and found the stuff. It was titled *The Yunnan Diary* with the words in the brackets "started on the morning of 21 April 2002."

"Not good," you said. As you said this, you changed it to "The Importance of Being Incorrect." Following is what you wrote in the first few days of your travel. You don't want to change or add anything but just leave them as they are.

5/5/02 (Sunday)

That is today. And it's the cut-off line. In the afternoon, I went with her to K-Mart to have my 5 rolls of film developed and enlarged. At the counter, there were already two people waiting to be served. By the look of it, the guy serving seemed to take forever. I said to her, "Let's go." She said, "Don't be impatient. It'll only take a few minutes." I said, "No, they'll treat each one like he or she was a god or something. I can't bear this." As we left the shop I told her of the speed at which one was served in a Hong Kong or Chinese shop. "Well," she said, "but I disliked being surrounded by the shop assistants." "But I dislike the service taking forever," I said.

No Thanks. Everywhere I go in China, I meet with people who never say "thank you." When I called the front desk in a hotel to get a universal plug, I said "thank you" but met with silence. When I handed in my passport and boarding card at the Customs, I said hello to the head behind the counter, I met with silence, and when it was processed and my things were handed back to me, I said thank you and I met with silence. Only a barely perceptible nod of the head. By the time I got out of China, I had stopped saying the fucking correct "thank you." Things got done without having to say "thank you."

4/5/02 (Saturday)

I was thinking of how to approach this piece of writing after landing. My initial thought was to do it backwards, like it is now. Then I thought it might go against the stream. Going against the stream will result in one's failure. Resulting in one's failure will lead to more failure and waste of time and effort. Why not just go with the flow and try to appeal to the masses? Then and there I decided to do it in a more conventional way, just chronologically. As long as people don't find you weird. I meant "going against the grain," not "the stream."

Bad. After I arrived in Kunming from Mangshi, the taxi driver told me of the bad things that had happened in Kunming. He told me how someone paid 5 yuan (slightly more than 1 Australian dollar) for a haircut and as a result shed all his hair because of the hair-lotion used. He told me how some local restaurants gathered all the leftover foods and, instead of throwing them away, tried to squeeze oil

ergative non-fiction from OUYANG Yu

from them and use the oil to fry the meat and vegetables with. The driver's story gave me such a fright that I did not go out for dinner but had it in the hotel; the dinner cost me 199 yuan (equivalent to about 45 Australian dollars).

I have to be the only incorrect person: While waiting for my plane, I felt my shoes too tight for my feet as they had been walking too long. To ease the pressure and pain, I took off my shoes and sat in a way where I could put one leg on the other or put it under part of my hip or put my two feet together and massage one with the other or softly stamp them on the floor to make them feel good. Meanwhile, I was reading a book to the oblivion of others. No, actually, I stole a look at people around me and saw no one do the same thing. Are they so fond of their shoes? Or are they too embarrassed to take them off in public? Are they afraid of offending people? Offending whom? But mine don't smell. I can assure them. Not only do those Aussies not take off their shoes but also those Chinese-looking people do not do that. I'm the only incorrect person, it seems, against so many correct ones, as correct as machines.

2/5/02 (Thursday)

[My writing process has considerably slowed down due to the sudden increase in my translation work load and to my reluctance to turn myself into a writing machine, as well as to my uncertainty about a career that is fast becoming one that has no difference from, say, a prostitute's or a plumber's. I resume this writing on the sunny Sunday morning of 12/5/02 in Kingsbury at my home after my absolutely impotent night last night about which I shall tell you more in another story when I have time. Still, before I forget, I must tell you this dream I had last night. I was in a crowded queue waiting to be served in a large canteen. Crowded because the queue was not formed in a single file but like a rope with many strands surging towards the tiny window where someone was taking the food coupons in exchange for meals and dishes. By the time I got to it, the tiny window had been pushed down to reveal an even larger kitchen behind the counter, where three people were standing before three enormous woks, each as big as a satellite dish, containing green vegetables that had turned dark black. These three people were using spades to slowly spade the cooked vegetables into waiting bowls. They were doing it so slowly, in spite of the waiting strands of the queues and knowing that people were hungry, that I could no longer contain myself but shout (myself awake). This dream tells you nothing except that at 47 and after more than 11 years in Australia all my dreams are China based. It just goes to show how shallow our Australian nationalism is and this talk about integration is such a sham that it cannot even bring a genuine Australian dream into my night dreamland. I never believe a single word of what they say. In fact, I don't believe in Australia. I believe in living.]

Characters. This person, as soon as he arrives in China, finds that he goes limp at the mere mention of *xiao jie* (little sisters, a euphemism for whores), but then when he

masturbates himself he finds that he can ejaculate . . . He's wondering what's wrong and I am wondering how I can develop him fully into a story and what name I should give him. You think he is I? You are dead wrong.

Complaint. [I had originally planned this section but decided against writing it. However, because of what happened today, I changed my mind and put it back again-14/05/02.] At Business Center at the hotel, I experienced what could be called my last outburst of anger in China. I was sending an express post containing my bank account and my identity card. Before I could check, the girl had already sealed the envelope. "Could I double check if they were there?" I said politely.

The girl did not respond to that but took the envelope in hand and began re-opening it, laboriously, painstakingly, reluctantly. Nothing escaped my eye as I was sitting right on her right.

When she finished opening the bag, she held the opened bag with a swipe of her right hand towards my direction while she looked the other way.

That did for me. I said, very slowly, very politely, "Are you unhappy about this?"

"It doesn't matter," she said, avoiding eye contact.

She paused and then denied, "No, I wasn't unhappy."

I left the office. By the time I got into the lift I had decided to make the complaint to the manager of the hotel. The upshot of it all was quite unexpected. Shortly afterwards, a woman manager came up to my room on the 17th floor, followed by someone with a plate of fruit, some pears and strawberries and oranges, and a big apology.

[I include this because it compares well with what I have experienced here in Melbourne in the last couple of days on two occasions. On the first one, a sales consultant at AMP hung up on me after he apologized to me and I said "I accept your apology," ever so politely. The manager who took up my complaint and apologized said she had checked with all the guys at her call center but none said that they had dealt with my call. You think I believe what she or they said? And, on the second occasion, I was given a take-away while I wanted a have-here at a McDonald's. The girl did not say anything but roughly grabbed the contents out of the brown bag and dragged the chips onto the tray, stained with the last serve, and poured the remaining on the tray. When I said, "the tray is very dirty," she did not look at me, her eyes already turned to the next customer. My instinct for complaint was shot up again when I simply said to myself: "I won't be bothered this time" and left it at that. Outside the McDonald's, the tables were heavily littered, as was the piece of ground underneath. 14/05/02]

Breakfast. The variety of foods available here was incredible, in both Western (cakes, biscuits, various kinds of bread, croissant, milk, coffee, fruit such as water melon, tomatoes, etc.) and Chinese styles (*you tiao*, *xi fan*, *dou jiang*, *za cai*, *luo bu gan*, *fu ru*, etc.). In the end, I chose the Chinese, as I always do.

Lunch. P, along with four women, from Wenquan and

Zhaotong, took me to have *yuanyang huoguo* [mandarin duck fire wok] at *Xiao Fei Yang* [little fat sheep]. Over lunch, P related a couple of *hun duan zi* [no English equivalent].

1. A couple, both married to someone else, finds a remote place for fun and pleasure by stealth after deciding against all the other hot spots for tourists to avoid potential embarrassment. It so happens that the woman's husband is on business there and checks into the same hotel on the same day. They bump into each other, the three of them! After all of them return to the capital city, the woman and her husband go to P to tell him the story and ask him for advice. P says to the man, "I know you have your own woman but hide it from your wife. Now that she does the same thing, you should forgive her. Don't you think?" 2. P also said that it is now a trend for men in their 30s to have a woman outside their home. People are used to this now. As long as their wives do not know this, it will be fine.

The women. It's not often that I have women for company over lunch or dinner, and it is even rare to have four at the same time. One of these four is a PE teacher from a middle school. Large boned, big faced, she is tall and quite dark with black spots on her face. The other woman is a traffic policewoman, fair-skinned, with large eyes and slightly uneven teeth. I remember cracking a joke with her in my hotel room that with her I felt safe. The third woman was from *fulian* [Women's Federation], with a thin face and small eyes but wearing a skirt with slits that went quite high up, revealing a pair of nice-looking legs. The last one who joined us at Little Fat Sheep was a plump woman who told me that she worked in a spring hotel where one could go for a hot bath in the mountain springs. My impression was that they were all married and had children, but they preferred to leave their children behind with their parents or their husbands and came to the capital city on the May Day holiday. They were saying that in the afternoon they'd go to another place

Correctness. On board the plane from Kunming to Hong Kong, I was reading a book titled *Eighteen Weird Things in Yunnan*. Among other things, I found this guy interesting when he said, "To have prejudice is to have a holiday for thought," and "it's not necessary to be reasonable in saying and doing everything" (p.12). I know you don't agree. How would you! I don't expect people to agree.

Hong Kong. According to my notes, this is a soulless place. All that is left is meat.

Black. Because of what happened this morning at Bank Hotel, I said over the phone to a manager, "It's only in China that one knows how black the human heart can be!"

Panlong River. The Curling Dragon River is where Bank Hotel is located but the water of the river is nearly black! The city is an enormous rubbish maker.

Sadness. As I am going back to Australia, I feel a little sad. What's the point in going to places like this? Whatever one sees is merely recorded on paper or photographed, and one cannot become part of what one sees or photographs. The very expression *caifeng* is evidence enough that one

cannot. [*Caifeng* in Chinese literally means "gathering wind," meaning to gather folklores and similar things.] The goodness of Lijiang is its own goodness and the goodness of the people living there. To take it away in photographs is just to show off.

1/5/02 (Wednesday): May Day. Back to Kunming from Mangshi.

Breakfast. Did not get up till 10:15 A.M. After I got up, I did not feel hungry but I went out to where I had had breakfast yesterday. The food stands were still open but were near an end. The *you bin* was cold. The *you tiao* seemed to have been put on the rack for too long. And the *mi xian* looked dirty. I decided then and there to abstain from eating.

Huangzhou. Called 114 for Bureau Chief Liu Gang's number and was told that his number was confidential. But then she asked if I wanted the number for Deputy Bureau Chief Wang Jianming's number. "Of course I do." When I dialed the number, a man answered the phone. He said he was Teng and told me to call Bureau Chief Liu. He gave me two numbers, one the switchboard and the other a mobile number. I called the switchboard and was told he was in a meeting. The operator said: "Ring his mobile." I did and he answered it, in Huangzhou accent, saying "You ring this number . . . It's Dealing with Falungong Office." Before I could say another word, he had hung up.

Waiting. The half-day before checkout at noon was hard to pass. I was left with one or two hours, could not go anywhere, and did not want to go anywhere. Made a few phone calls, one to Zhong Dao, who said he did not have the numbers for Yang Xie and Yang Jian. Then he asked how my translation of his work was going. I told him straight away that nothing had been published since last time. I am now standing by the window, looking at the city of Ruili outside. Not many old houses. A new city. A few tile-roofed houses squeezed between the newly built tile-faced buildings, incongruous but catching my attention. Buildings, high and low, everywhere, some roofed with yellow *liu li* tiles. One, in particular, had a crowd of bowl-shaped antennas on its top. People on the streets. Small vehicles running to and fro, mostly motorcycles, carrying two people, one in front of the other, three-wheeled vehicles with blue covers, and a few bicycles. A woman in red is turning around a corner, one hand holding an opened umbrella and the other holding the handlebar, disappearing into the distance. Further off is a range of mountains with bald places that looked brown and ugly. The rest of the place shrouded in a grayish haze. I am no longer having much to do with this city. To get a taxi here, you only have to spend 5 yuan (equivalent to 1.10 Australian bucks). I surfed the net last night and it only cost me 2 yuan (less than 50 cents). [A photo is available of the Internet bar in which I surfed.]

Power Failure. Or *ting dian*, in Chinese, which is not exactly power failure but "stopped electricity" or "electricity stopped." In this so-called "best hotel in town," there

was *ting dian* twice last night, plunging everything including me into darkness. No explanation. I tried to contact the front desk but the line was constantly busy. The number was 9666. It just didn't make sense.

Hand-held Tractors. In my hometown, Huangzhou and Melbourne, this *shoufu tuolaji* has disappeared, but here in this border town of Ruili, it's everywhere. It was a common sight in the late 1970s China but seldom seen these days in big cities. Just now one went chugging past below and I am standing on the seventh floor.

Wild Vegetable Lunch. A plate (they call it *li*, "example" or "sample") of *yancai chao roupian* (Sliced Pork Stir-fried with Pickled Vegetables) and an enormous bowl of *bazhong yecai tang* (Soup with Eight Wild Vegetables), big enough for eight people to eat. The plate of pork was so hot that I used up two packs of tissues to wipe the sweat that kept oozing out of my skin on my forehead and my nape. The soup did taste "wild" but that's as far as it went. I could manage only one third of either. It cost me 18 RMB for the pork plus 8 RMB for the soup and the rice. Well, I was reminded of something. At *hudiequan* (Butterfly Springs), I had a lunch with my two taxi-drivers. When I said, at the end of my drinking session, that I *yaofan* (want rice), my driver corrected me by saying, "In here you say *tianfan* (add rice), not *yaofan*, because *yaofan* means to beg." He was of course right, as the Chinese expression for the beggars is *yaofan de*. [Photos available]

Fake Money. Again, I spent two yuan checking my email at the Internet bar and then went to the nearby Bank of China to make enquiries. A thin bank staff member was explaining to a client that there was a new fake 100-yuan note out now, made in Taiwan. When it went through *dianchaoji* (the money counting machine), there was no warning tone triggered off. "*Zhen li hai!*" (this one is as untranslatable as the Australian expression "fair enough") he said. The way to tell the difference, he said, was to feel its obverse side. If it felt as smooth as a paper, it was fake. The real money felt gritty and rough. In a way, I thought to myself, that equally applied to people. Those who dress themselves up in a chic, smooth manner are often fake people, whereas the rough, coarse, and undecorated people are much more real. If I don't tell you which bit I threw in today and which bit I wrote on the day, you wouldn't know, would you? But you wouldn't want to know anyway.

Dai Zu. Literally, it means "Dai nationality" or "ethnic Dai." The Chinese character is written with the radical symbolizing "human" accompanying the radical symbolizing "Thai." At my wild vegetable lunch, a Dai girl was serving



Kunming (photo courtesy Ouyang Yu)

me when I asked her if they still *zhuafan* (literally "grab rice," a way of eating rice with both hands). She said they no longer *zhua* (grab) but *jingpozu* (ethnic Jingpo) still *zhua*. I said was that because you were more "evolved"? She smiled but did not say a word. Then she humbly said, "Our border area is still very backward."

[I expect the correct Australians to attack me for being a Han racist, or more correctly, an Australian racist here. Do I even need to defend myself?]

Fake Burma Road. The driver told me that in that accident in which the bus carrying a few dozen people fell off the road, over 30 people died. However, a 75-year-old lady survived as if by magic. Half the mountain slope was washed with blood, then burnt clean by the petrol poured out from the bus. Fortunately, the bus did not drop into the river and the river had not swollen up as the rainy season had not arrived yet. Since then, the old Burma Road has been abandoned for the new road, which is the one that I have traveled from Dali to Ruili.

Paidu yangyan wan. This is the name of a pill that means "the pill to get rid of the poison and enrich one's facial features." P came to my dinner to share a bottle of Heineken with me and told me that he had to go downstairs to meet with the boss of that pill, who was, according to P, wearing a *man tian xing* (a skyful of stars) watch worth 280,000 yuan, popular with most Hong Kong *laoban* (bosses), driving a Benz 600 worth over 2 million bucks with properties worth 200 million bucks!

Sleep. I have to go to bed now and tomorrow afternoon I'll have to go back to Hong Kong, a city that I never like.

30/4/02 (Tuesday): A tour to Burma (all day).

Lao Wai. On our way back from our tour in a Burma

border town called Nankan, our ethnic Bai girl tour guide told the story of a *lao wai* (old foreigner). She said that this *lao wai* was searching in vain for an elephant in Burma when he saw a green coconut and was told that it was the elephant's egg. So he took it back with him and began to hatch it together with his wife until the egg was becoming an elephant. All his neighbors came along to watch. One put his hand in the bag and said, "Oh! I touched his trunk." And another put his hand in and said, "Oh! But he is pissing!" Everyone laughed, but I wanted to ask: What nationality is this old foreigner?

Restaurants with No Signs. In Nankan, we went to a densely packed market, but what attracted my attention was a restaurant with everyone sitting inside and eating around one big table and no signs of anything on its outside. The restaurant next to it was the same and so on. No name! And even the shops with names had characters missing. For example, one shop was called in Chinese, *wanxiang huaren zhubao dian* (Rangoon Chinese Jewelry and Treasure Shop), but the characters "Chinese" and "treasure" were missing from the sign. [Photos available]

Charcoal. In the market, I saw many things that were commonplace in my childhood but had disappeared from sight for many decades now, things like bars of hard brown-colored soap and large pieces of black charcoal in hemp bags, measured with two wooden sticks that were quite primitive by comparison with the Chinese *gancheng*. I took photos of those as they reminded me of my childhood in China. In a way, these were the things I missed.

Tired. Suddenly, I felt tired. I wished that the pace of life could slow down, considerably. It was after I spent some time surfing the net while picking my nose in an Internet bar that I thought so.

Burmese Money. One Chinese yuan exchanges into 100 Burmese dollars. I bought two music VCDs for 900 Burmese dollars, equivalent to 9 Chinese yuan or 2 Australian dollars.

Things I bought and. A bottle of cream to ease the back pain, for her, that I bought, in a Buddhist Temple, for 3 Chinese yuan, before lunch. A kitchen knife the size of a matchbox that I bought, for 3 Chinese yuan (less than an Australian buck), before dinner. When the square-faced man behind the counter recommended I buy more, as gifts for friends, I said that it might not be a good idea. He readily agreed, saying, "Right, right, just as our saying goes, *yi dao liang duan*." That saying brought the point home to me, now realized in English, "one knife, two pieces." Then I bought a cigarette lighter for 1 yuan and a pack of Red River for 12 yuan. The fat owner showed me a bottle of Poison and sprayed it on me for effect. Seeing that I wasn't interested in perfume, he started showing me *chunyao* (literally spring medicine but actually aphrodisiacs). One capsule he said was wonderful, which looked deep brown and could be squeezed like toothpaste. One could be used four times. As soon as you applied it to that thing (the dick, he meant, although he didn't even say it; in Chinese grammar, you don't have to mention the subject while still

making perfect sense. For example, you could say, "as soon as you apply, would up." What would up? Of course the dick but you don't have to say it), it would erect. And it works. There is another kind of "spring medicine" that bears the use by date of 2047! According to him, if you take this one before making love, it can help you get rid of all the dirt inside your body so that you remain perfectly clean no matter how dirty you play or how dirtily you make love with people. 33 yuan a capsule. That's about 8 Australian bucks. Not bad, hey. I asked if he'd ever used it; he said yes. Then he told me it's easy to *gaoding* (get things done, specifically, have sex with prostitutes) in Ruili, for "one buck"; sometimes you could even *gaoding* for 50 Chinese cents. I had learnt in Dali that "one buck" is a euphemism for 100 Chinese yuan, equivalent to 23 Australian bucks.

New Expressions. There are three major products in Burma: *shitou* (stone, meaning jadeite), *mutou* (wood), and *baifen* (white powder, meaning drug). And the typical way in which an ethnic Dai woman wears her style of dress is "hat without top, skirt without waist, trousers without crotch, and shoes without the uppers."

Tour Guide. The most remarkable thing about her is a black mole right in the middle of her *renzhong* (person-middle or philtrum). I'd have to check what my face book says about that mole in terms of *fengshui* or fortune, but her monthly salary is 400 yuan (less than 100 Australian bucks). According to her, she worked from 7 A.M. till 9 P.M. on a daily basis, no weekends on Saturdays and Sundays. It's all work. She holds something that looks like a passport but is actually Border People's Certificate for Entry and Exit. Each exit to Burma and back costs 50 Chinese cents, less than 10 Australian cents. She is ethnic Han but wears a Dai *tongqun* (tube skirt) because it is her work unit's requirement that she wear traditional ethnic attire.

Border Burma. I entered at Nankan town and exited at *jiégao* (literally, Older Sister Tell, or, in a Chinese website, Sister Accuse), having stopped halfway at *mujie* (literally, Wood Older Sister). In Burmese, we were told whatever is accompanied by the word *jie* (older sister) carries the connotation of prosperity. All the girl tour guides from the Burmese side speak perfect Chinese. Before lunch, in a jewelry shop, I met with a guy who claimed he was the head of the local Customs and was originally from Hankou, the same place I was from. His name was Li Daohua who, with his two wives and three children, lived in a house of 18 rooms and was going to marry his third wife. He insisted that I purchase one of the jade bracelets that were categorized as 6As, saying that he would give it away at any low price. When I said that I had only got 400 yuan in my pocket, he wilted instantly. Eventually, I had to leave on the excuse that I was hungry. This little man with shiny eyes and shiny black hair combed back smoothly ordered his secretary about like a servant. Whenever he wanted to show me a new bracelet, he shouted towards the outside and a rotund young woman would instantly appear at the doorway with something wrapped in an unmarked cloth; she appeared at least six times, which

meant I was shown more than six different kinds of bracelets; sometimes she would bring in more than one box. The interesting thing the Customs man or director told me was that his father was now aged 85, had originally come from Wuhan, and had fought the Japanese as a Kuomintang soldier. I said I'd like to go and see his dad if I had more time.

Di Gao. Pronounced "dee gough," this is the Chinese version of the Western discotheque, located at Jingcheng Hotel where I stayed. Bored at night, I went inside to have a look. It was so noisy and green arc lights were convulsively sweeping the faces sitting in the dark which were barely visible, less so than the bottles of drinks. I had to leave. No expected encounters with prostitutes.

The Long Neck. At the ethnic village in the border Burma town, I had a photo taken with the two local ethnic women with their necks stretched to an impossible length wearing a metal wiring cage, solid wiring, copper colored. The tour guide told us that they had to wear that for the rest of their lives, and once that was removed their necks would not hold but collapse, and that would result in instant death. They can't even wash their necks inside the cage. That made me wonder about their necks.

Yi Ren Bao. "Treasure for a feminine person," a product name that sounds like it's made for women alone. I was on the point of using one of these when I noticed the remark on its outside that it's *youchang shiyong* (paid use) for 10 yuan/bag. I turned it over and saw English instructions on the other side, part of which went as follows (here I quote): "... it promises you a refreshing feeling after use ... Apply this product on or around the private parts by scrubbing with hands for 2-3 minutes ... It's better in effect to use while bathing." It suddenly dawned on me that if I had a woman with me tonight, I would have to use it.

The Fake Emperor. In one place designed like an emperor's palace, paid opportunities were provided for tourists to sit on the throne in emperor's clothes sandwiched by two beautiful princesses, or were they imperial concubines? One after another Chinese visitor climbed on top of the throne, after getting the Burmese emperor, also a fake one, to shed his royal attire, and changed into it, having their photos taken by their friends, but their nylon socks revealed their true colors. I thought of adding one more poem to my *Fake Sequence* written in Chinese a few years ago.

Breakfast. I had one bowl of *doujiang* (soy-bean milk) for 70 Chinese cents and two *youtiao* (each 30 Chinese cents).

Weather. Fine until afternoon when it rained in Burma. A shower. Together with three girls, I was eating potato chips, dipped in potato sauce, which tasted a bit hot, and drinking lemon juice. Two of these girls, actually tour guides, were ethnic Bai, and one of them had a big mouth and liked to crack jokes. When she took photos for her tourist group members, she would invariably say, "One, Two, Three!"

The Foreigner. I did not see a single foreigner in Ruili, but on the Burma Road at lunchtime I saw one backpacker. He was the same guy who got into another bus next to mine in Dali that went to Baoshan. After lunch, I went to the

toilet. When I came back, I saw him standing out among the line of passengers waiting to board their long-distance coach. Because his eyes met mine, I said "Hi" on going past him, but he made no response. I had the impression that this guy was over-cautious about meeting with strangers. He was obviously a Westerner, but I didn't even know whether he spoke English or German.

25/04/02 (Thursday)

Found out last night that it would take a whole day to go to *shi lin* (The Stone Forest) and it's likely to miss my 6:30 flight to Lijiang today; so, I gave up on the idea. During the day, I just had a look around Bank Hotel and saw a *guwan* (ancient play or antiques) market with rows of stands selling preserved foods. On my way back, I bumped into a barber's shop and had a haircut there. While this was going on, I kept wondering what it was like when my uncle or my 14th granddad had a haircut in Kunming in those days, 40 years ago. That came to me from time to time.

Lijiang. Arrived at Lijiang airport at around 7:30 P.M. Surprisingly, the city was 30 km away and the taxi fare cost 80 bucks, quite a lot. The local taxi drivers stood in a cluster in front of a row of waiting taxis. As I went to two vans in a corner across a vacant lot with my luggage, thinking that they might be the airport shuttle buses, one of them called out to me and pointed out the right one for me, which was actually near them. In doing so, the woman driver actually lost her chance to earn 80 bucks, whereas the shuttle van only cost 10 bucks.

Things were far worse than I had expected on my arrival. I was told there was no reservation for me even when I showed them the faxed confirmation. It was after much exchange of hot words and when I had to reveal my identity by showing them my Australian passport and threatening to contact the Australian Embassy that they or the manager gave in, giving me a back room grudgingly for only one night! By then it was already 9:30 P.M.

A man in ethnic costume took me through a maze of corridors and stairways to my room built all in wood that looked like an ethnic abode. He was ethnic Yi. I gave him 5 bucks for taking me there with my luggage. After he left, I noticed two flies in my room. They kept me company for the rest of the night, now gone to sleep.

I pissed and pressed the button. No water. I turned on the tap, water but cold. Outside it was cold and I realized that I had not brought enough warm clothes with me for the mountainous place. Anyway, I changed clothes and went to a nearby restaurant, Sichuan style, and had Chinese Chives Fried with Cured Pork and Fermented Soya Beans, Salted or Otherwise, Green Capsicum with *pi dan* (skin egg or preserved egg) and rice. Everything seemed fine except the Chinese chives, which were shit, unchewable, tasting like grass. Outside, streams of tourist buses and tourists, accompanied by the loudspeaker broadcasting the same theme song of Butterfly Springs again and again.

The van driver was from Dongbei (Northeast China). He said that there were many Dongbei people here who

had come in the early 1950s to *zhibian* (support the border). As if to prove what he said, the Sauna manager's accent revealed him to be also from Dongbei. I met him in the long winding corridor. He was a man in his early or mid 50s with a broad face. He stopped me in my path and introduced me to a dozen girls packed into a tiny room, but all I saw was a crowd of eyes and faces. He said if I wanted I could have them massage me, feet, body, even love. Just 200 RMB, all ethnic Naxi, and that he had selected the best of them by only taking the fairest skinned, 3 out of 10. Very intense competition, he said.

The Sauna I was shown in was totally dry for the whole city tonight had run dry completely anyway as tourists swarmed the city. Storm is a more correct word. They flooded the place, making me sick. I began regretting that I should ever have come.

Then I found out the whole reservation business was a sham. The hotel I had booked in Dali had no number registered that you could get by ringing directory 114. The hotel in Ruili told me that no one had booked anything for me in my name. I had to ring a lot of people including James whose mobile was switched off and the Australian Embassy on the emergency number, whose recorded message gave me 2 evening numbers, one not working, another directing me back to Australia. When I rang that number, the guy put me on hold forever. So, I just hung up and decided to leave it until tomorrow. It's already midnight by now. Finally, I decided to discontinue using my iBook and take up my writing in the most primitive way, with a pen and paper.

This was a night passed without a shower in years, not even my face and teeth washed. Am I happy? Well, I can stand it without any complaint, impressing the hotel staff who gave me a large pail of warm water (only hot water available to flush the toilet with).

22/04/02 (Monday)

James was trying to get me an itinerary for a trip to go to Luoping, Dali, Lijiang, and Ruili, where the old Burma Road was.

The physical features of Kunming, by contrast with Hong Kong, were quite plain except for the moments before touching down as the land below looked like a palette with paint splashed all over the place, red, ochre, brown, even black, all mixed together.

I looked at myself in the mirror and saw someone else. It was my character from the past, a past that was more past than ever before, a past anchored in a war that had destroyed so many lives and yet at least managed to create me. My character, whose name is not yet given and known, had just arrived in Dali by bus.

We had dinner by the lake lit up in a myriad of mostly green lights. A fish, a black chicken soup in a bowl large enough to feed 10 people, and a sweet eggplant, as well as a *xiao tai yang*, a kind of Japanese beer, meaning the small sun, and a pack of Hong Ta Shan cigarettes. I told her of my uncle and my 14th grandfather being soldiers here more than half

a century ago. They are dead now and I want to write about them but feel unable to because I know nothing of what they did then. "You can make it all up," she said. "You are *zuojia*. So you can *zuo* it, blindly *zuo* it. That's what they all do."

21/04/02 (Sunday, the last day)

[I cut this section with three long paragraphs for self-censorship. Sorry, mate.]

End of the Story

I should have put this right at the beginning, as it is a most correct thing to do, but I didn't. Today is Sunday, 26 May 2002, one day after I saw Yu Hua off at the Tullamarine Airport. Our conversations, in public and private, keep coming back to me, and I feel that if I do not write them down or include them in here, I will certainly forget them all in a couple of weeks' time with no more insistence than they are doing now.

Yesterday, I invited him along with Lars, my Danish friend, and my wife and my son to Plume in Doncaster for a yum cha and I was again struck by the answer Yu gave in response to my question why *God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy did not sell in China. Yu said that the publisher had great hopes but the sales barely hit the 1000 mark. "The truth of the fact is," Yu said. "Chinese have no interest whatsoever in India."

Then our conversation moved onto advances. Yu said that China was doing the same sort of thing now. Even before he began on the book, he was offered a large sum. "All they know of is that I am going to write my next novel," he said, looking very serious. "And they asked how much I needed. I said probably 300,000 yuan to purchase a house and they gave me it." My calculating mind immediately concluded that that was about 75000 Australian bucks.

I sort of switched between English and Chinese as I had to also entertain my English speaking Danish friend, which was what I was doing now. He asked about my recent trip to Yunnan, and I told him what I've told you here before, adding that when I met this local novelist I asked him to name the top novelists in China today. He named Yu, among other people such as Mo Yan and Wang Shuo, but when I asked Yu if he knew that novelist, he said "No."

"That is life, isn't it?" Lars said and we both laughed. We had to laugh.

Then, in my car on our way to the airport a few hours later, I said to Yu that the passion for literature among the local Chinese community had dropped to zero or below zero. What I did not say was the attendance of people to his talk on Thursday night, which was no more than 12, including himself and Paul from the Chinese Museum. Halfway through two left, and towards the end one more left. I had to do most of the questioning, as few of the audience asked anything. That of course was no fault of Yu's; it was just one of those things. I had met Lars at the entrance and as soon as he saw me he said "Chinese." I said, "You are not coming in?" "No," he said. "Chinese. It's all in Chinese." Xu, whom

I had rung earlier, had said that he would come and would let me know even if he didn't, but he didn't. There were two Australian men who could speak limited Chinese, but that was it. The good thing is I have videotaped most of the scene; the talk was fantastic. It would come of use when he won his Nobel Prize for literature in a few years' time, I am sure.

In my back garden, we were drinking Hubei tea at my plastic green table covered with Chinese newspapers and magazines, of which he was reading a *Ming Pao Monthly* that I get for free regularly from the publisher. Then I started telling him of my failed project in *Western Erotic Poetry in Chinese Translation*, which was meant for publication in 1989 but was indefinitely shelved after the June 4th and eventually returned with a minimal amount of rejection fee in 1993, stopping dead. He had a read of my introduction to it published in *Otherland* (No. 4, 1998) and was quick to point out a few lines by A. D. Hope as excellent. I said he was dead now, and he said the whole idea was good and there shouldn't be any problems getting it published in China these days. The government, he said, didn't give a damn about sex; in fact, if people were all engaged in sex, they would cause much less political trouble. I said that was right. If you run out of your semen, you run out of your steam for anything else. He guffawed. But, he cautioned. When you approach a publisher, you can't start with a sub-editor, nor can you engage everyone else in a discussion. If you do that, even if your book is good, but if one single person expresses doubts, that will be the end, as that would eventually negatively influence everyone's opinion. The thing to do is

go straight to the decision-making publisher and persuade him to do it.

Yu Hua, by the way, is the author of *To Live*, the film adaptation of which was directed by Zhang Yimou.

Over the years I have met a number of well-known Chinese writers in Australia, such as Bai Hua, Han Shaogong, Zhang Xianliang, and now Yu Hua but have seldom written about them or them and me. Writing Yu Hua in is only a convenient coincidence, as it fits nicely into the structure of this piece: not a novel, not a travelogue, not anything but just a piece for myself. Most Australians, including Chinese Australians, have no interest in Chinese literature let alone Chinese writers. In some way this is reciprocated in China, where few have any interest in Australian literature except for those who are given Australian money to run their little centers and stuff.

It serves Australian literature right.

Just as I am going to wrap this up (9/6/02) something comes back to my memory regarding Stephen King. Yu Hua said at Plume, I recall, that one publisher in China did all King's books hoping that they would sell like they did in America or elsewhere, but they'd made the biggest mistake of their lives. As few bought King, they managed to only sell 1000 copies!

"I like that kind of incorrectness," I said to Lars, who nodded and smiled.

"That shows the maturity of the Chinese book market; it doesn't have to follow the Americans," Yu said.